

Rock Ahoy!

The grounding of the Waters.



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A beeper went off in the dark. LT Danielle Wiley, supervisor at the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Detachment in Kodiak, Alaska, looked at the clock. The red 3:00 a.m. beamed. There had been another grounding.

The Grounding

It was June 18, 2004. The Alaska State Trooper vessel *Cama'i* left St. Herman's Harbor in Kodiak at 9:35 a.m. An hour later, Wiley and I were in the Ouzinkie Narrows. It was raining hard. Fog was thick. The GPS indicated the grounded boat's position nearby. All at once the fog shifted, like someone had pulled back a curtain. In front of us rested the 70-foot wooden boat *Waters*. Its bright blue hull loomed on the rock pinnacle. It was almost perfectly upright, as if Neptune himself had set it there (Figure 1). We circled the scene carefully. The Number 4 dayboard was broken off the mounting. It lay on the rock. Blue hull paint was visible on its red surface.

been en route to Kodiak from a lodge on the Katmai Coast to pick up supplies. The tide was high at the time, nine and a half feet. The skipper stated later that he had slacked the boat's speed in the narrows because of the weather, and that his reduced maneuverability, combined with the tidal current to drag the boat sideways onto the rock. He said the strong eddy



The crew of the *Waters* had

Figure 1: The *Waters*, aground. Petty Officer Sara Francis, USCG.

Aids to Navigation

"Twelve feet, 10 feet!" A watch stander on the focsle of the ship called back to the bridge. "Eight feet" was the next cry. The 225-foot black hulled ship loomed closer to the massive rock that lay ahead. Twenty-knot winds and rain slapped the crew on the weather decks and the four-man team on the rock. "Three feet!" The 2,000 ton ship came to a halt. Not quite a year after the *Waters* grounding, the crew of the Coast Guard cutter *Spar* and the Aids to Navigation Team, both out of Kodiak, repaired the dayboard.

Executive officer, LT Shawn Decker, was piloting the Kodiak-based cutter *Spar*. The cutter is equipped with a single controllable pitch propeller, bow and stern thrusters, which give it the maneuverability it needs to tend buoys offshore and in restricted waters. This was a particularly tricky bit of navigation. Prior to approaching the rock, the crew deployed a small boat and made exact soundings of the area near the rock with the small boat's fathometer. On approach to the rock, the cutter crew had deployed the anchor. By catching and dredging, they used the anchor as a tether to keep the vessel from surging forward to wreck the ship on the rock that had damaged many other vessels. The dayboard now sits about six feet higher than before. It is more visible in high tides, and debris doesn't drift into the dayboard, damaging it.

had surprised him, because he had found no mention of it in his copy of *The United States Coast Pilot*. He also said the dayboard wasn't visible until the *Waters* was upon it.

He and his crew had smartly plugged the fuel vents before departing for the nearby Ouzinkie village in a skiff. They arranged for salvage with a local operator, but he had no luck the following morning in a high tide just over nine feet. Next, the fishing vessel *Alpine Cove* tried to tow the *Waters* off the rock, but the cur-

rent prevented steering and put too much strain on the tow-line. Finally—several days after the grounding—the tug *Kodiak King* got the *Waters* off the rock in a nine-foot tide. The damage consisted of an inch-deep penetration in the hull, caused by the dayboard's stub. Water seeped through the damaged caulking. Divers from the nearby village made temporary repairs, and the *Waters* sailed to Kodiak, where the staff at Fuller's Boatyard hauled it out and replaced the broken board.

Follow-up

Meanwhile, Wiley thought about what the skipper had said: He believed the cause of the grounding was tricky currents combined with scant information in *The United States Coast Pilot*. It's a series of nine volumes that contain supplemental information hard to display on a nautical chart, compiled by a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. You can order the *Coast Pilot* or download parts of it from the Office of Coast Survey (chartmaker.ncd.noaa.gov/nsd/coastpilot.htm).

Near the rock where the vessel grounded, the *Coast Pilot* indicates that currents can set a boat into danger quickly—but it doesn't elaborate on tidal direction. What's worse, the deepest water lies just off the rock, so the *Coast Pilot* recommends favoring the rock, over the nearby shoals. Add to that some recent tectonic activity, and it was possible that changes in the hydrography had altered the flow of water in the narrow passage.

Wiley eventually determined that the skipper's decision to enter the narrows during a period of extremely limited visibility was the cause of the grounding. The decision required reduced speed, which reduced the boat's maneuverability. This particular skipper should have known better, since he was familiar with the area. He even mentioned having towed other vessels off the same rock.

To prevent future accidents, Wiley contacted NOAA and suggested providing additional information about the currents in the *Coast Pilot*. Until the updated version of the *Coast Pilot* becomes available, the best advice for recreational boaters is to pay attention to tidal charts, watch the currents, and sail only with good visibility.

About the author. PO Sara Francis enlisted with the Coast Guard in 2000 after high school. She is now a first class petty officer and works in Public Affairs. Prior to Public Affairs she was a small boat engineer in Northern Michigan. Four of her five years have been served in Alaska. She currently lives in Anchorage with her husband and daughter.